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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest describes the lives of migrant families, migrant students' education, and migrant parents' involvement in their children's education. Migrant families tend to travel along well-established geographic routes which can be identified as the East Coast Stream, the Mid-Continent Stream, and the Western Stream. In 1986, the average annual income for migrant farmworkers was less than $6,500. In addition to poverty, living and working conditions pose serious health problems for migrant families. Families migrate for economic reasons, and migration occurs in both interstate and intrastate patterns. The level of child maltreatment is much higher among migrant families than among the general population, and intrastate migrant families have a higher incidence than interstate migrant families. Younger children and children from single-parent families also have a higher probability of being maltreated. Migrant students have the lowest graduation rate of any population group in the public schools. High risk characteristics of migrant students include low socioeconomic status, high levels of mobility, low levels of English language skills, and higher levels of handicapping conditions. Parental involvement in education increases student achievement. Migrant parents of high achievers hold positive attitudes toward school, while parents of low achievers hold more negative attitudes. By understanding migrant family lives and communicating with parents, educators can have a profound effect on migrant students' education. (KS)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools May 1991

Family Lives and Parental Involvement in Migrant Students' Education

EDO-RC-91-3

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MIGRANT FAMILY lives revolve around working and moving on. Families move from one job to another to better their financial situation. This Digest describes the lives of migrant families, migrant students' education, and migrant parents' involvement in their children's education. The discussion should be of particular interest to teachers and administrators who work with migrant students.

Profile of the migrant family

Because no single federal office has responsibility for data collection on migrant demographics—and because researchers disagree on how to define "migrant family"—population estimates of migrant farmworkers vary from 317,000 to 1.5 million (Shotland, 1989). Moreover, the diverse nature of migrant families' lifestyles makes it difficult to characterize the migrant family.

What we do know is that families tend to migrate along well-established geographic routes. Shotland (1989) discusses the three distinct streams: the East Coast Stream, the Mid-continent Stream, and the West Coast Stream.

The East Coast Stream consists of American Blacks, Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, Anglos, Jamaican and Haitian Blacks, and Puerto Ricans. This route includes the states along the eastern seaboard and the southern part of the United States.

The Mid-continent Stream primarily consists of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, with small numbers of American Indians. The route begins in south Texas and moves north through the midwestern and western states.

The Western Stream starts in California and moves up through Oregon and Washington. Although composed mostly of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, it has, in recent years, also included Southeast Asians.

Income studies (Shotland, 1989) show that in 1986 the *average annual income* for migrant farmworkers was remarkably low—less than $6500. Work for the migrant family is usually seasonal and inconsistent. Most workers are not covered by employee benefit programs. In addition to residency problems, language barriers, and lack of contact with community services, most migrant families receive few social, economic, or health benefits. Though very poor, migrant families benefit little from available human services programs.

The living and working conditions of migrant families are a serious national health problem. Shotland (1989) reports that there is risk of injury from farm machinery and equipment, poor sanitation, chronic and acute exposure to toxic pesticides, and harsh and dangerous physical work. In fact, farm labor is now more dangerous than mining. Many families lack toilets and clean drinking water in substandard living quarters, which are usually run-down farmhouses, barrack-like structures, or small shacks.

Studies about migrant families

Robert Coles' classic study of migrant families still accurately captures the essence of life for a migrant family (Coles, 1971). He reports that the family is always stooping and picking, always doing what has to be done. Poverty, hunger, and uncertainty fill their lives; there is always the next place to go. Children learn early that each new day brings backbreaking toil for their parents (and often for them, as well) and that after one field is picked, it means a trip to another one, often in a new county or a new state. The video documentary, *New Harvest, Old Shame*—with its rich portrayal of the daily lives of migrant families—reveals that life has not changed much for migrant families (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1990).

Diaz, Trotter, and Rivera (1989) conducted an ethnographic study of migrants in ten states. Their report was the result of more than 3,000 hours of participant observation, semistructured interviews, and life histories. They recorded two patterns of migration, intrastate and interstate migration. The major reason for migration was always economic. Families based decisions about when and where to move on knowledge about the length of seasons, timing of crops, changing agricultural conditions, rates of pay, and available housing. Migrants talked of isolation and constant adjustment to new surroundings. As one said, "It's hard to have to always leave and say goodbye all the time" (p. 48). Stresses on migrant families are enormous. Child abuse reports reveal a dark side of migrant family life—child maltreatment. The level of maltreatment among migrant families is much higher than it is among the general population (Lawless, 1986). The risk of maltreatment, however, varies with migrant status, family structure, and age. For example, *intrastate* migrant families have a higher incidence of reported maltreatment than *interstate* migrant families. Younger children and children from single-parent families have a higher probability of being maltreated.

The findings for single-parent families and younger children are consistent with research about families that are not migrants. Researchers, however, disagree about the reasons for the different rates of maltreatment among interstate migrants and intrastate migrants. Some believe the lower incidence among interstate migrants results from the fact that these families travel with their support systems, whereas intrastate migrants do not. Their support systems help them cope with the stresses of migration. Other researchers suggest that, on the contrary, interstate migration simply reduces the likelihood that maltreatment will be detected and reported.

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Migrant students' educational experiences

The report of the Interstate Migrant Education Council (1987) details the special problems migrant students face. In addition to the problems associated with mobility, these students are often handicapped by limited English fluency, poverty, lack of academic skills, and—to help support the family—the need to work or care for younger children. Migrant students, in short, are at great risk of dropping out of school.

In fact, they have the *lowest graduation rate of any population group* in the public schools. The comparative rate at which they are able to complete postsecondary education is even lower. *Five times* as many migrant students are enrolled in the second grade as in the twelfth grade, and migrant educators place the dropout rate for migrant students anywhere from 50 to 90 percent (IMEC, 1987).

The Center for Educational Planning (1989) in Santa Clara, California, reports that not only do migrant students have *high-risk characteristics* such as low socioeconomic status, high levels of mobility, and low levels of English language skills, but that they also face economic, cultural, and social *discrimination*. Baca and Harris (1988) point out that migrant students are more likely to be affected by handicapping conditions because of poverty and multiple health problems. They report a higher incidence of birth injuries, mental retardation, accidents, poor pre- and postnatal care, and anemia among migrant students than among the general population.

Parental involvement in migrant students' education

Even after differences in student ability and socioeconomic status are taken into account, the evidence that parent involvement in education increases student achievement is clear (Henderson, 1987). In one study of high-achieving and low-achieving migrant students (Center for Educational Planning, 1989), parents of high achievers could list the ways the school helped their children. These parents held positive attitudes about the school. Parents of low achievers, on the other hand, were more negative and could not list anything the school was doing on behalf of their children. Even though no migrant parents in this study helped their children with homework, parents of high achievers reported that they spent time communicating with their children and giving them educational experiences. No parents of low achievers reported these two activities.

Parents who are barely surviving economically find that their children's school attendance is a hardship. Children could improve the family's income by working in the fields if they did not have to go to school. This is a fact of migrant family life related to extreme poverty.

In addition, many migrant families believe it is the school's responsibility to educate their children; for these families, parent participation in education is a radically new cultural concept (Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). These parents want the best for their children, but they believe that their involvement may be counterproductive. They believe that the schools might construe their personal involvement as interference. In fact, successful students sometimes report that someone other than their parents inspires them to complete school (for example, Diaz et al., 1989).

Herrington (1988) discusses the importance of having teachers who will reach out to parents and find ways to contact them. He notes that many migrant families have strengths of resiliency, resourcefulness, and responsiveness that educators need to recognize, make use of, and reinforce.

Conclusion

Clearly, migrant students are vulnerable to undereducation and dropping out of school. With our nation's current economic picture, migrant family lives are not going to change substantially; families will still need to move to find better economic situations. What educators do, however, could have a profound effect on migrant students' education.

Understanding migrant family lives and communicating with parents is a first step. Knowledge about the culture and values of migrant families can help educators facilitate migrant students' learning.

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